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HENRY THOREAU'S  
MOTHER







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## HENRY THOREAU'S MOTHER

*= The Brainerd Family Manuscripts*

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## ANENT SANBORN'S LIFE OF THOREAU.

THE artless outburst of an indignant woman, herewith presented, made its appearance in the Boston "Advertiser" of the date February 14, 1883, and was reprinted in the Concord "Freeman" for February 23 of the same year.

The article gave universal satisfaction in Concord, where both Thoreau and his biographer were well known. It is not known that the biographer made any reply. There is a time when silence is indeed golden!

### SANBORN AS A MOURNER.

The day after Thoreau's funeral the Concord "Monitor" published the following sonnet:

#### THOREAU.

Hush the loud chant, ye birds, at eve and morn,  
And something plaintive let the robin sing;  
Gone is our Woodman, leaving us forlorn,  
And veiled with tears the merry face of Spring.  
Our woods and pastures he for other groves  
Forsakes, and wanders now by fairer streams;

Yet not forgetful of his earthly loves,—  
 Ah, no! For so affection fondly dreams.  
 Dear One! 'T were shame to weep above thy grave,  
 Or doubtingly thy soul's far flight pursue;  
 Peace and Delight must there await the brave,  
 And Love attend the loving, wise, and true.  
 Thy well-kept vows our broken aims shall mend,  
 Oft as we think of thee, great-hearted friend.

This was published on the 10th of May. And in the same magazine, two weeks later, appeared the following revision :

HENRY DAVID THOREAU.

This sonnet, owing to the impossibility of sending the proof to the author, was altered and marred in printing. In justice to him and ourselves, we reprint it.

Hush the loud chant, ye birds, at eve and morn,  
 And something plaintive let the robin sing ; —  
 Gone is our Woodman, leaving us forlorn,  
 Touching with grief the glad aspect of Spring ;  
 Your whispering alleys, he for other groves  
 Forsakes, and wanders now by fairer streams,—  
 Yet not forgetful of his earlier loves,—  
 Ah, no! for so affection fondly dreams.  
 THOREAU! 't were shame to weep above thy grave,  
 Or doubtingly thy soul's far flight pursue!  
 Peace and delight must there await the brave,  
 And Love attend the loving, wise, and true.  
 Thy well kept vows our broken aims shall mend,  
 Oft as we think on thee, great-hearted friend.

CONCORD, May 6, 1862.



Was ever "copy" so "altered and marred"? Was ever any one so credulous as he who believed the compositor "altered and marred"?

But, observe the date. The very day upon which Thoreau died! Before he is cold in his coffin the poet-biographer is delivered of a sonnet!

#### SANBORN AS A BIOGRAPHER.

It was twenty years later when the poet-biographer essayed to write a biography of his departed friend. How he did it is shown in the indignant communication to the Boston "Advertiser." On which the reader will please make his or her own comments.



## HENRY THOREAU'S MOTHER.

MR. SANBORN, in his book called "Henry D. Thoreau," has seen fit to speak slightly of Thoreau's mother and aunts. It seems particularly unmanly to do this now, so many years after their death, and when no near relative is left to defend their memory. Perhaps for this reason he felt that he could do it with impunity. He has expended most of his injustice upon Henry Thoreau's mother. Such being the case, a few words from one who knew her well may not be inappropriate. As my excuse for troubling you with this communication, you will perhaps allow me to quote a few paragraphs from Mr. Sanborn's book. Speaking of John Thoreau, Henry's father, Mr. Sanborn says: "John Thoreau led a plodding, unambitious, and respectable life in Concord village, educating his children, associating with his neighbors on those terms of equality for which Concord is famous, and keeping clear, in a great degree, of the quarrels, social and

political, which agitated the village." This is well enough, but he takes occasion to add: "Mrs. Thoreau, on the other hand, with her sister Louisa, and her sisters-in-law, Sarah, Maria, and Jane Thoreau, took their share in the village bickerings"!!! I fail to see how Mr. Sanborn can know this unless he took a pretty active part in these same village bickerings himself; and if he does not write it of his own knowledge, he is surely writing gossip of a very small and petty kind. Perhaps he thought it witty to speak of them altogether in this way.

Dear "Aunt Maria," one of the sweetest, gentlest women that ever lived, and whose letter, written when she was eighty-four years of age, is the one good thing<sup>1</sup> in Mr. Sanborn's book! He rewards her for it by speaking of her as taking her "share in the village bickerings!" It was surely left for Mr. Sanborn to discover this.

Few of us remember Louisa Dunbar or Sarah and

<sup>1</sup> Some may take exception to the remark that Miss Maria Thoreau's letter is "the one good thing in Mr. Sanborn's book." I do not mean to imply that there are not other good things in the book, — pleasant anecdotes and the like. I am not criticising the book from a literary point of view; but the letter seems to me the only thing which adds anything to our knowledge of Thoreau and his ancestry not obtainable elsewhere.

Jane Thoreau well enough to speak of them from our own knowledge, but those who do say that Mr. Sanborn's allusion to them gives a very wrong impression, and is entirely without excuse. A lady who well remembers Louisa Dunbar and Jane Thoreau said to me: "I cannot conceive of such a thing being said in connection with them. Why, we all loved them." But it is Henry Thoreau's mother whom Mr. Sanborn singles out as the special target for ill-natured criticism. I will quote again. After speaking of her brother, Charles Dunbar, Mr. Sanborn goes on in this strain: "Thoreau's mother had this same incessant and rather malicious liveliness that in Charles Dunbar took the grotesque form above hinted at. She was a kindly, shrewd woman, with traditions of gentility and *sentiments of generosity, but with sharp and sudden flashes of gossip and malice, which never quite amounted to ill-nature* [the italics are my own], *but greatly provoked the grim and commonplace respectability that she so often came in contact with.* Along with this humorous quality there went also an affectionate earnestness in her relation with those who depended on her, that could not fail to be respected by all who knew the hard conditions that New England life, even in a favored village like Concord, then imposed on the mother of a family, where the outward circumstances

were not in keeping with the inward aspiration." In another place he says of John Thoreau: "He was a small, deaf, and unobtrusive man, plainly clad, and 'minding his own business;' very much in contrast with his wife, who was one of the most unceasing talkers ever seen in Concord. Her gift in speech was proverbial;" and more follows of the same sort. It has not commonly been supposed that Mr. Sanborn considered "minding one's business" the height of virtue. I have never before heard it intimated that Mrs. Thoreau failed in that respect, and yet she was not like a woman I once knew whose next door neighbor died, and had been buried two weeks before she knew that anything unusual had taken place! Mrs. Thoreau was a good friend and kind neighbor, as many can testify.

It is, perhaps, needless to remark that Mr. Sanborn's book has given great pain to the many friends of the Thoreau family. But it is for this reason that I propose to speak of a few things which Mr. Sanborn omits to speak of, and to enlarge a little upon some of which he does speak.

I think the characteristics which chiefly impressed those of us who knew Mrs. Thoreau best, were the activity of her mind and the wideness of her sympathy. The first quality Henry inherited. She was also an excellent mother and housewife. In the midst of pov-

erty she brought up her children to all the amenities of life, and, if she had but a crust of bread for dinner, would see that it was properly served. Mr. Sanborn says patronizingly, "she had sentiments of generosity." She certainly had, though I should scarcely have spoken of it in that way. Year after year, on Christmas and Thanksgiving days, she invited to her table, not the rich who would return her hospitality, but her poorer neighbors from whom she could expect no return. She was never so poor or so busy that she did not find ways of helping those poorer than herself. Such was her influence in this respect that it was felt by all who came in contact with her, and one young girl was heard to say, "When I grow up, I will do like Mrs. Thoreau. I will give my gifts to those who need them, and I will invite to my table the poor rather than the rich, who are sure to have plenty of invitations without mine."

And yet she did not confine her hospitality to the poor; people of every kind and degree were welcomed under her roof.

Her efforts in the anti-slavery cause are well known. She was unsparing in her denunciation of the fugitive slave law, and was one of the first to give aid and comfort to fugitives. Are these things what Mr. Sanborn means by "sentiments of generosity"? When she

became interested in a poor servant-girl, she placed money in the bank for her, and encouraged her to add little sums to it from time to time. And when she made her will, every dollar was disposed of conscientiously where she thought it would do the most good, and in no way merely for her own pleasure. It was no mere impulse which made her do these things, but a high and noble principle. There was no poor man or woman who came in contact with her to whom she did not do some good.

She had her faults, as which of us has not? but her aim was high. She expressed herself frankly at all times, and she sometimes told disagreeable truths; perhaps she felt it a duty to do so. She had the courage of her convictions, and she certainly never hesitated to condemn a fault. It was done in all honesty to bring about a reform. She was much more likely to say severe things to people than of them. This does not make a person popular. She was a great talker, and she occasionally said sharp things; but what was this in comparison with her virtues? She was quick-witted and observing, and naturally had more to say than some of her neighbors. She was never guilty of mean and petty gossip. She was not uncharitable, and could readily forgive a fault if she saw any signs of repentance. On the whole, I think few women have done



more good and less harm in the world than Mrs. Thoreau.

That any biographer of Henry Thoreau should use his name as a center around which to weave a tissue of petty gossip about his mother and aunts would seem peculiarly ungracious; but that this should be done by one calling himself his "friend" is a refinement of cruelty which has seldom been paralleled in literary annals.

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